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ABSTRACT

A study of the status of alternative education (AE) in Pennsylvania surveyed 220 administrators and 234 teachers and counselors in AE settings. Results indicate that discipline programming was common to most programs, probably because Pennsylvania's AE legislation specifically states that AE programs are "designed to modify disruptive behavior." Rural programs reported more emphasis on discipline than did urban programs. The large majority of programs had teacher student ratios of 1:12 or fewer students. Career counseling and curricula had only modest priority. Full-time assignment of a program administrator was rare. The 5,540 AE students served in 2000-01 were predominantly White males, and student population had steadily increased in the past 5 years. Ninety-three percent of AE efforts targeted students in grades 7-12. Rural programs had more students with disabilities than did urban programs, perhaps excessively so. Forty-three percent of AE teachers had no or inadequate preservice training. More than one-third of AE teachers had fewer curriculum resources than did regular classroom teachers, and nearly 55 percent indicated that students in AE were excluded from parts of the curriculum that were available to regular education students. This raises questions of the right to equal education. Family involvement was only on an "as-needed" basis. Urban respondents viewed their programs as more effective in improving academic performance than did their rural counterparts and also reported having the same or more curriculum resources as regular classrooms than did rural respondents. Five policy recommendations are presented. (TD)

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Survey and Analysis of Alternative Education Programs

A report by
Nathaniel S. Hosley
Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania

Team members:
Blake Bergey, Dr. Nicole Chartas, Nichole Eisenhart, Dr. Edward Jensen, Beth Lawless, and Laura Oakes

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INTRODUCTION

Alternative education (AE) programs are experiencing tremendous growth in Pennsylvania and nationwide. Research regarding the practices in AE settings remains limited, and no research on Pennsylvania programs is readily available. In the research presented here, two surveys (one of teachers and one of administrators) and the resulting analysis provide some baseline data and opinions regarding Pennsylvania programs.

The research was conducted to investigate the current status of AE in Pennsylvania. The focus of the administrative survey was to collect demographic data and the perceptions of administrators on issues such as the mission, focus, and strengths of current alternative education programs. The focus of the teacher survey was to collect information about program and curriculum issues, information regarding teacher preparation and professional development, and perceptions of teachers on the mission, focus, and strengths of programs.

The purpose of collecting this data was to:

1) establish a baseline of information for Pennsylvania alternative education programs;
2) assess differences between rural and urban programs;
3) assess differences between teachers and administrators; and
4) determine the common elements across alternative programs.

There are many variations of alternative education programming across the nation, and most models are represented in Pennsylvania. Charter schools, special vocational schools, magnet schools, gifted alternatives, boot camps, and alternative schools for disruptive youth are some of those variations. Clearly, legislation and budgetary allocations dictate how AE is defined and much of what will happen in any state. For example, in 2001–2002 Pennsylvania allocated $26 million for alternative programs serving disruptive youth. This represents a dramatic jump from $11 million in 2000–2001. The state Department of Education states the purpose of this funding as follows:

". . . removes disruptive students from regular school programs in order to provide those students with a sound educational course of study and counseling designed to modify disruptive behavior and return the students to a regular school curriculum...alternative programs may operate outside the normal school day of the applicant district, including Saturdays. . . (schools) shall adopt a policy for periodic review of students placed in the alternative education program . . . and, programs may include services for students returning from placements or who are on probation resulting from being adjudicated delinquent...or who have been judged to have committed a crime under an adult criminal proceeding . . ."

The type of programs, staffing, and other considerations are shaped to a significant extent by the purposes outlined in this funding. Nonetheless, a baseline of data is not currently available, and there is merit to establishing a knowledge base related to AE activities in the commonwealth.

Questions for consideration in this analysis included:

- How are alternative education programs organized and structured?
- Who are the students?
- What are the educational, pre-service training, professional development, and preparedness characteristics of teachers? What needs might be related to these issues?
- What is the focus of curriculum and what differences are there in alternative education curriculum from regular education?
- How do teachers and administrators evaluate the effectiveness of their alternative education programs?
- How do teachers and administrators evaluate the importance of the various processes and goals of alternative education programs?
- Are there differences in perceptions between rural and urban teachers and administrators?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jay McGee (2001), an alternative school administrator, asserts there is a demand for AE schools that addresses the needs of students not succeeding. This demand pertains to all age groups, including elementary, middle, and high school students. He asks who is served by alternative education schools by age, race, gender, frequency, and length and he wants to know the benefit of such programs and how one knows what results are being achieved. All of these questions are addressed in the administrator survey.

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Cox and Davidson (1995), using a meta-analysis to determine the overall effect of AE programs, concluded that AE programs can have a small positive effect on school performance, school attitude, and self esteem and that alternative education schools with specific target populations have more impact than do undefined schools.

Guerin and Denti (1999) suggest that successful programs have certain characteristics or features including: curricula that is responsive to the needs of the students; assessment; teaching of social skills, social responsibility, and restorative justice; focus on core academic subjects; and a presence of supplementary subjects (e.g. career awareness).

This survey and analysis of AE practices directly or indirectly reviews most of these and several other research-based AE strategies. The researchers anticipated finding that program curricula would have the primary focus of changing behavior of students and/or increasing academic performance of students. Assessment and transition programs are likely to be inconsistent due to the realities of the need for immediate referrals, staffing patterns, and limited funding. Assessment refers to the evaluation of students in one or more of the following areas: academic performance, academic ability, behavior, social skills, and cognitive skills. Transition programs in school district AE programs are generally designed to assist students in making a smooth transition from alternative education back into the regular classroom, the workplace, and/or post-secondary training.

Gregg (1999) suggests that programs with a punitive purpose may cause schools to adopt ineffective models for improving learning or behavior. She cites Raywid's (2001) research and the resulting description of three distinct types of schools. These AE school types provide an interesting framework within which the findings of this study can be viewed. Gregg outlines implementation issues and characteristics for each of the three types as follows:

Type I programs - Academic

-Full-time, multiyear education for students of all kinds, including those needing more individualization and those seeking more innovative or challenging curriculum.
-An emphasis on student responsibility for learning, meaning that students choose to participate in the alternative program and work is self-paced.
-Full instructional program, often including vocational and community service components, so students can earn credits to graduate.
-Deregulation, flexibility, autonomy, teacher and student empowerment.

Type II programs - Discipline

-Aim to segregate, contain, and reform disruptive students who typically do not choose to attend and are placed in the program for specific periods; short-term participation.
-Curriculum is limited and/or students work on assignments provided by home schools.
-Highly structured and punitive.

Type III programs - Therapeutic

-Short-term therapeutic settings for students with social and emotional problems that create barriers to learning.
-Focus on attitude and behavior remediation and rehabilitation.
-Students may choose not to participate.

The Center-sponsored researchers anticipated finding an overlap of the three program types but with an emphasis on Type 2-Disciplinary because of the Department of Education regulations (to serve disruptive youth) for many alternative education programs receiving state funding.

The need for alternative education programs is well documented. As Raywid (2001) notes, "Unsuccessful students need a good education a lot more than do the youngsters who manage to succeed under virtually any circumstances." Quality of education is directly impacted by the quality of teaching. Rigorous and supportive professional development practices for professionals who choose to work with these students are of paramount importance.

METHODOLOGY

To define rural and urban, this study used the 1990 U.S. Census Bureau definition and the Center for Rural Pennsylvania classification system. For the 1990 Census, urban was comprised of urbanized areas and places of 2,500 or more people outside of urbanized areas. Everything else was considered rural. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania used this definition to create a list of rural and urban school districts based on the rural/urban status of the majority of the population in each district. The resulting list was used for this study.

This project involved the development and distribution of two survey instruments. The first was designed for school district administrators, specifically superintendents or their designees (Survey A). The second instrument was designed for teachers in alternative education settings (Survey T). Both surveys were sent to all 501 school districts in Pennsylvania.

For the analysis, 454 surveys were used, representing 234 teachers and 220 administrators: 186 were rural participants and 286 were urban participants. To break this down further, there were 95 rural teachers, 139 urban teachers, 91 rural administrators, and 129 urban administrators.

The return rate for administrators was 45 percent (220 of 501) or 50 percent for rural and 40 percent for urban respondents.

The rural return rate for the teacher survey (unduplicated, by district) was 29 percent (53 of 182 school districts) and the urban return rate was also 29 percent (93 of 319 school districts). The lower teacher return rate may be due to the fact that no alternative education teacher mailing list was available. The teacher surveys were mailed to administrative offices with a request to distribute them directly to AE teachers. Returns within responding districts ranged from one to six surveys with an average of 1.6. It is important to note that among the returns were surveys from guidance counselors and other professionals with direct, daily program contact. A decision was made to include the survey input from these professionals. There were 40 returns among the 234 fitting this description.

The survey instruments

Survey A: The survey allowed administrators to provide their perceptions and opinions regarding the "effectiveness" and "importance" of numerous variables. Other questions were asked to assess any bias or emphasis across the five traditional program areas of academic, therapeutic, behavior change, discipline and career preparation; to assess the importance of general goal areas in AE programming; to assess opinions related to the preparation and professional development of teachers and others working in AE; to collect information about how programs were organized, whom the programs served, and additional information about program processes; to collect information about students including numbers of participants in AE, race, gender, special education involvement, reason for placement, and disposition after AE involvement; and to identify the number of professionals working in the AE program. Finally, two items invited the respondents to provide opinions regarding the

greatest needs in the AE program and any additional comments they may have had.

Survey T: The survey of teachers is particularly important for the assessment of programmatic concerns. Of particular interest was assessing the similarities and differences of opinion that may exist between the classroom teachers and the administrators on issues such as the importance of various program components, goals, and other organizational/programmatic structure issues.

Survey T differs from A in several respects:

- Some items were removed so as not to re-collect demographic data collected on Survey A.
- There is a more complete effort to assess the status of curricula in AE settings.
- Whereas Survey A was sent directly to the potential respondent, Survey T was sent to the superintendent for distribution to the teachers, as no AE teacher address list exists.
- Survey T more completely addresses the issues of teacher training, pre-service preparation, and education.

RESULTS

Survey results yielded background information on the structure and administration, students, personnel, and curriculum of alternative education programs as well as insight into teacher and administrator views on the importance of certain program elements and overall effectiveness of the programs.

Section 1. Administration and Structure of Alternative Education Programs

Program structure and service provision

The primary responsibility for the administration of 38 percent of rural alternative education programs lies with a principal with combined duties. One other arrangement was also prominent - an administrator, who is not a principal, with combined duties at 23 percent. Nine percent of rural programs are administered by someone whose time is dedicated 100 percent to the AE program. In urban areas, this is true nearly twice as often.

Fewer rural programs, 2 percent compared to the urban 10, had a full-time principal for AE. However, more rural programs, 26 percent compared to the urban 17, had some other arrangement not described in the survey.

The great majority (82 percent) of respondents indicated that services are provided throughout the 180-day school year. Figures were not much different for rural and urban responses though rural services were provided for slightly less of the calendar year. About 5 percent of rural programs run shorter than the school year while 9 percent run longer.

Although asked to select just one response, more than 10 percent of respondents chose to indicate more than one service provider to portray a more accurate picture. The figures differ quite a bit between rural and urban programs. Rural services are most frequently outsourced (45 percent) while 40 percent are provided directly by the district and the remainder by some combination of outsourcing and

Table 1. Provider of Alternative Education Services

	Direct provision by the school district	Outsourced/ contracted to IU, private, or other entity	Education by district; social and support contracted	Other combination of direct provision & contract	No response
Rural	39.8%	44.9%	6.1%	8.2%	1.0%
Urban	51.0%	27.6%	6.9%	13.1%	1.4%

direct provision. On the other hand, in 51 percent of urban programs, services are provided by the district and 28 percent are outsourced.

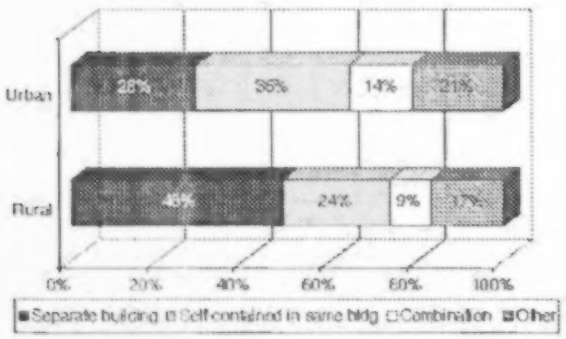
In addition, 38 percent of respondents involved the local IU in service provision while 61 percent indicated that the IU did not participate.

More than one-third (36 percent) of rural AE programs had a teacher for every six students. Less than 7 percent had more than 12 students per teacher. Rural classrooms tended to have fewer students per teacher than urban classrooms with 57 percent of teachers having eight or fewer students compared to 49 percent in urban areas.

Location and quality of facilities

The location of alternative programs is most often (37 percent) separate from the regular classrooms in another building. The second most frequent location for programs (30 percent) is self-contained classroom(s) within the same building as regular classrooms. Rural programs are much more frequently in a separate building.

Chart 1. Location of Alternative Education Programs



*bars for rural and urban do not total 100% since not all respondents answered this question.

Opinions on the quality of AE facilities differed significantly by administrators versus teachers and by urban versus rural respondents. Nearly half of administrators responded that facilities are of adequate size and quality to meet the needs of students. Nearly 29 percent stated that the facilities were equal to regular classroom settings. Teachers responded more often than administrators that facilities were of lesser quality and more crowded. Teachers responded less often than administrators that facilities were adequate and equal to regular classroom settings.

Rural facilities were more often crowded but also more often adequate than urban facilities. Rural responses also indicated more frequently than urban that AE settings were more modern and spacious than regular classrooms.

Financial Issues

The 161 programs reported a total annual operating budget of $15.0 million or an average of $93,596 for each program or district. For districts reporting both a budget and number of students, the cost per student calculation can be made. An adjusted total operating budget of $14.7 million represents 154 programs and includes service to 2,566 students. The average cost per student was $5,743.

For 67 rural programs a total operating budget of $5.3 million served 1,070 students at an average cost per student of $5,021. The total operating budget for 87 urban programs was reported as $9.3 million. The budget served 1,496 students at an average cost per student of $6,259. Rural and urban programs both reported that 26 percent of their alternative education budgets comes from grants.

Section 2. Students Served in Alternative Education Programs

Number of students served

Respondents reported a total of 5,540 students from 203 alternative education settings served by programs during the 2000-2001 school year. This count included 2,099 students in rural schools and 3,441 in urban schools and represented an average of 24 students served in rural schools and 30 in urban schools. At any one point in time that year, respondents statewide served an average of 17 students. Rural areas served an average of 15 students and urban areas served an average of 19.

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Table 2. Quality of AE Programming Facilities

	Responses of:	Adequate in size and quality	Lesser in quality than regular ed	Crowded but good quality setting	Equal to regular classroom settings	Better than regular education	Other or no response
Total	Admin	46.4%	12.7%	1.5%	28.6%	4.0%	6.9%
	Teacher	38.5%	19.3%	5.6%	23.7%	5.6%	7.4%
Rural	Admin	47.8%	12.2%	2.6%	25.2%	4.4%	7.8%
	Teacher	41.3%	14.7%	8.3%	19.3%	7.3%	9.2%
Urban	Admin	45.3%	13.0%	0.6%	31.1%	3.7%	6.2%
	Teacher	36.7%	22.4%	3.7%	26.7%	4.4%	6.2%

Thirty-seven percent of programs experienced growth of 1 to 10 percent during the past five years. An additional 21 percent experienced a growth rate of 11 to 25 percent, while 15 percent of programs experienced less than 1 percent growth or a decrease during the same period. These percentages should be viewed with caution as 26 percent of total responses and 40 percent of rural responses fell in the "no record or not applicable category." Among those responses, many were first-year programs.

Student demographics

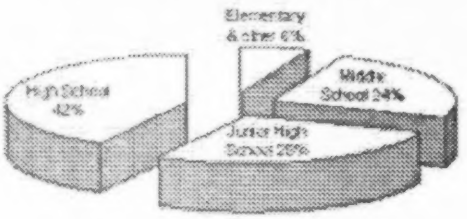
Gender was tracked and reported by 172 programs including 73 rural and 99 urban. Among the 4,720 students served by those programs, 70 percent were male and 30 percent were female.

Rural respondents reported the race of students as follows: 93 percent white, 3 percent black, 1 percent Hispanic or Latino, less than 1 percent both American Indian or Alaskan Native and Asian, and 2 percent unknown. Urban respondents reported 83 percent white, 13 percent black, 2 percent Hispanic or Latino, and less than 1 percent each of Asian, more than one race, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and unknown.

Administrators were asked to identify the percentage of students served in their alternative education setting that had an Individualized Education Plan. This identifies students with disabilities. Among rural students, the average was 18 percent while the urban average was 7 percent.

The age group receiving the most services was high school students (42 percent), with middle school (28 percent) and junior high (23 percent) students following. Differences between rural and urban responses were not significant on this item.

Chart 2. School Level of Rural AE Services



For the inclusion of an economic indicator, respondents were asked what percentage of their alternative education students are eligible for free and reduced school lunches. Nearly half of respondents indicated that less than 40 percent were eligible. Twenty percent of respondents noted that at least 60 percent were eligible. Among rural programs, there were much higher rates of free and reduced lunches – 37 percent of rural respondents indicated that 60 percent or more of their students were eligible.

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Reason for placement in alternative education

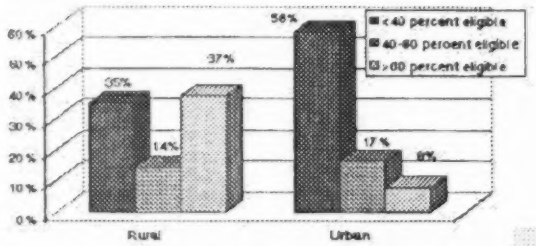
When respondents identified an unduplicated number of alternative education students served in each category of placement, two reasons stood out in a statewide analysis:

- Misconduct meriting suspension or expulsion – 30 percent
- Disregard for school authority or a school policy violation – 30 percent

Significant differences between rural and urban reasons were evident in four categories. Urban programs made referrals at higher rates than rural programs for misconduct meriting suspension or expulsion and for disregard for school authority or a school policy violation. At the same time, disregard for school authority or a school policy violation was the number one rural reason, showing that rural reasons were more dispersed while urban reasons were concentrated in two categories, each accounting for over 30 percent of placements.

Rural programs made referrals at significantly higher rates than urban programs for habitual truancy and court ordered placement.

Chart 3. AE Students Eligible for Free or Reduced School Lunch



*columns for rural and urban do not total 100% since not all respondents answered this question.

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Program participation time frames

Student length of participation in alternative education varied greatly from program to program. In fact, participation was fairly evenly distributed for the total group across the following categories:

- less than nine weeks – 23 percent
- nine to 18 weeks – 25 percent
- more than 18 weeks but less than one school year – 28 percent
- one school year or more – 23 percent

Table 3. Reasons for AE Placement

	Rural	Urban
Academic performance difficulties	6.4%	5.1%
Violent or threatening behavior	6.2%	6.8%
Students identified as gifted, needs alternative	0%	<0.1%
Possession of weapon	2.1%	0.1%
Commission of a criminal act	2.7%	4.2%
Misconduct meriting suspension or expulsion	18.5%	33.6%
Habitual truancy	17.9%	9.5%
Possession or use of controlled and/or illegal substance	4.7%	4.0%
Disregard for school authority or a school policy violation	23.4%	31.8%
Emotional/behavioral disorder	1.9%	2.3%
Conduct disorder	3.3%	0.1%
Court order	11.1%	<0.1%
Returning from placement (detention or other)	1.8%	0.1%

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The length of participation in both rural and urban programs was most often more than nine weeks. Only 25.3 percent of rural and 18.0 percent of urban students participated in programming for a period of less than one nine-week term. Participation in alternative programming for one year or more was more common among urban students. Among urban districts, 24.8 percent reported average participation of students as one school year or more. Among rural districts, 19 percent reported average participation of students for one school year or more.

Rural AE students tend to spend more time per day in the AE classroom. More than half of all respondents described the length of time students spend each day in the alternative education setting as 3.5 to six hours per day. More than 20 percent of students spent more than 6 hours per day in alternative education. Rural and urban differences were significant in two areas: more urban districts reported that students spent one to 3.5 hours per day in an alternative setting, and more rural districts reported 3.5 hours to six hours per day. These longer rural days may in part explain the shorter rural participation terms.

There were also differences between the administrators and teachers in reporting of the number of hours per day that alternative students spend in the alternative setting. Most notably, more administrators indicated that students were in the alternative classroom 3.5 to six hours per day. The number of responses exceeds the number of respondents on this item, which suggests that some districts had program components that varied the amount of time that students are involved each day in the alternative setting. This often is a function of student need for programs and/or the type of programs provided to students.

Disposition of students

What happens to students when they leave alternative education at the end of the school year? The survey asked for an unduplicated number of students who: returned to the regular classroom or home school; returned to the home school but were readmitted to the alternative education program during the same year; did not return to the home school and left the program; and remained in the program. This snapshot report for the year 2000-2001 demonstrated that 44 percent of students served returned to the regular classroom or home school. A significant number (37 percent) remained in alternative education placement for the following year. Eight percent of students returned to the home school but were readmitted to the alternative program during the same year. This was an impressively low number and reflected low recidivism given the population of students served in alternative education. Twelve percent of students did not return to the home school and left the alternative program. This number included those who graduated as well as those who may have dropped out of school. Future research should discriminate between the types of leaving that may occur.

Table 4. Hours Students Spend Each Day in AE Setting

	Responses of:	Less than 1 hour per day	1 - 3.5 hrs per day	3.5 - 6 hrs per day	More than 6 hours per day	Varies by classroom	No response
Rural	Administrator	0%	8.4%	64.2%	21.1%	3.2%	3.2%
	Teacher	3.0%	10.0%	53.0%	27.0%	7.0%	0%
Urban	Administrator	0%	16.8%	55.0%	22.1%	3.8%	2.3%
	Teacher	1.4%	28.2%	45.8%	20.4%	3.6%	0.7%

Section 3. Personnel in Alternative Education

Number of full-time equivalent (FTE) personnel

For this study, personnel are made up of administrators, teachers, psychologists, and social workers. The average number of FTE administrators in all AE programs was less than one – the rural average was 0.71 compared to 0.59 for urban. One rural respondent reported six FTE administrators. However, the most frequent response for both urban and rural was zero and the second most frequent was one FTE administrator. Meanwhile, urban respondents reported an average of 2.56 FTE teachers compared to the rural 2.26. One rural respondent reported 14 FTE teachers and one urban reported 13.

Special education certified teachers averaged 0.70 FTE in rural programs and 0.53 in urban. These numbers reflect the disparity that also occurs under the earlier item describing the number of students with an Individualized Education Plan (a requirement for all special education students). Rural special needs students are served at considerably higher percentages than are urban special needs students in alternative education programs.

An average of 0.32 FTE psychologists serve rural programs. The average for urban areas is 0.19 or about one day in every five-day workweek. The presence of social workers in alternative education settings is also more prevalent in rural programs, which report an average of 0.88 FTE compared to the urban 0.64.

Teacher education, training, and professional preparation

Approximately 95 percent of all AE teacher respondents hold a bachelor's or master's degree. More urban teachers (43 percent) hold a master's degree than do their rural counterparts (36 percent).

Teachers most frequently indicated that their educational background is in secondary education followed by special education and elementary education. While differences were only slight between rural and urban areas, higher percentages of rural AE teachers were educated in counseling, early childhood education, special education, and other fields. Urban teachers had higher percentages in elementary and secondary education.

Pre-service training is another component of teacher preparedness for the AE classroom. Conferences and school districts were most often the sites for pre-service training. Colleges and university settings were common also. Rural teachers more frequently received training from school districts or other sites than did urban teachers and less frequently received training at conferences and college/universities.

Nearly 25 percent of rural teachers entered alternative education settings with no special training related to issues of teaching at-risk and/or disruptive children and youth. An additional 21 percent described their pre-service training as inadequate. Just 18 percent had at least enough training to feel well prepared. Urban teachers fared better: 29 percent felt well prepared. However, 41 percent felt thay had no or inadequate training.

Nearly one-third of rural administrators perceived

Table 5. Teachers' Highest Level of Education

	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree	Doctorate degree	Other	No response
Rural	60.2%	35.7%	2.0%	2.0%	0%
Urban	51.5%	42.8%	1.5%	3.6%	0.7%

Table 6. Level of Teacher Preparation for the AE Classroom

	Rural	Urban
Under-prepared or somewhat under-prepared	31.5%	22.7%
Average preparation	47.8%	49.2%
Above average or highly prepared	15.2%	25.0%

their AE teachers to be under-prepared to teach in the alternative setting while 15 percent indicated above average preparation. Urban teachers were seen as more prepared with 25 percent being above average and 23 percent below.

When administrators were asked about the need for certain types of teacher preparation and development programs, 81 percent indicated a definite to high need for professional development activities for teachers, administrators, and other professionals working in alternative education settings. An additional 15 percent indicated some need. There was no significant variation between rural and urban schools. Also, 82 percent of respondents indicated some degree of need for a master's degree program in alternative education. Total urban respondents saw a slightly higher need than total rural. But rural teachers and urban administrators rated the need for a master's program higher than did urban teachers and rural administrators.

Among some professional development items, particular correlations are significant. To begin, respondents who rated teachers as being better prepared tended to report that there was not a need for professional development activities and also generally indicated that a master's program was not necessary. Interestingly though, rural administrators rated teacher preparation lower than did urban administrators but also rated the need for professional activities and a master's program lower than did their urban counterparts.

Section 4. Alternative Education Curriculum

Focus and content

Of the five possible curriculum-focused response options, administrators' responses were fairly evenly distributed across four of the responses, leaving therapeutic change as a much less common focus (see Table 7 below). Urban respondents more frequently indicated a balance between academic, behavioral, and therapeutic change. Rural teachers note individualization of curriculum at significantly higher rates than did all other respondents and urban teachers noted academic change higher. Administrators in general reported more focus on therapeutic change.

As far as curriculum content, because respondents were encouraged to mark all curricula that apply, responses indicate that teachers had an average of nearly three curricula available. Responses showed a decided emphasis on providing the same curriculum that is available in the regular classroom and on remediation of skills and knowledge. More than three-quarters (76 percent) of rural programs include the former and 72 percent include the latter component. More than half of rural AE programs include an alternative curriculum and more than one-quarter include vocational education. The most significant difference between rural and urban programs was that just 14 percent of rural programs offered college prep compared to 37 percent in urban areas.

Table 7. Focus of Curriculum

	Responses of:	Behavior change	Therapeutic change	Academic change	Balances academic, behavior, & therapeutic change	Individualized for each student	No response or NA
Rural	Admin	25.4%	9.3%	22.8%	20.7%	19.7%	2.1%
	Teacher	23.2%	4.3%	22.0%	20.1%	28.7%	1.8%
Urban	Admin	22.2%	7.3%	22.9%	23.7%	21.8%	2.3%
	Teacher	20.2%	5.2%	28.2%	24.6%	21.8%	0%

Comparisons with regular classroom

Teachers generally indicated the following about alternative education classrooms:

- teacher to student ratio is smaller;
- there is more latitude to change, adapt, or create curricula;
- age and grade differences make it necessary to implement varied curricula within the same classroom;
- there is more emphasis on social skills training;
- in general, students seem to maintain current academic levels or make gains after alternative education participation;
- there is more emphasis on discussing or working on personal issues; and
- there is more emphasis on discipline.

Urban and rural differences on these items are nominal except on the academic gain and discipline items. Urban teachers indicate that students seem to maintain current academic levels or make gains after alternative education participation at a rate of about 10 percentage points higher than rural teachers. Rural teachers indicate that more emphasis is placed on discipline at a rate that is 14 percentage points higher than urban teachers.

Other differences are that more rural teachers, 58 percent versus 52 percent of urban, reported that AE students are excluded from some parts of the curriculum available to regular education students; more rural (43 percent) than urban (37 percent) respondents have fewer curriculum resources available than the regular education classroom; and fewer rural respondents, 24 percent compared to the urban 33, indicated that transition planning occurs for all students.

Family involvement

More than 40 percent of responses on both surveys cited that programs work with families on an as needed basis, and approximately 20 percent hold a minimum of one meeting that includes family members each academic year. According to teachers, just below 9 percent of urban programs and just over 9 percent of rural programs do not include family involvement as a program component. There were small differences between rural and urban respondents where fewer rural programs provide counseling support to family members. Interestingly, teachers and administrators in rural and urban areas followed no pattern of higher or lower responses.

Assessment

About one-third of respondents indicated that assessment occurs prior to program entry and is included in referral documents. Approximately one-quarter indicated that assessment is the responsibility of a professional team, and an additional one-fifth attributed assessment responsibility to the alternative education teacher.

Again there is no clear pattern of rural, urban, teacher, and administrator responses although it seems that true responsibility may be hard to place -

Table 8. Family Involvement in AE Program

	Responses of:	On as needed basis	Meetings monthly or more	Minimum of one meeting per year	Provide counseling support to family members	Not a program component	Other	No response or not applicable
Rural	Admin	43.8%	9.7%	23.6%	11.1%	6.9%	2.1%	2.8%
	Teacher	47.9%	4.3%	18.6%	8.6%	9.3%	10.7%	0.7%
Urban	Admin	44.3%	8.5%	19.4%	12.4%	9.5%	3.0%	3.0%
	Teacher	40.7%	8.6%	23.1%	9.9%	8.6%	0%	0.4%

fewer administrators saw assessment as the responsibility of a lead administrator, and fewer rural teachers saw it as the teacher's role. Fewer teachers than administrators viewed assessment as the responsibility of a guidance office.

Section 5. Importance of Program Elements and Effectiveness of Programs

Using a scale of one to five, respondents indicated their opinions and perceptions on the effectiveness or importance of certain AE program variables. The scale represented "ineffective to effective" and "unimportant to important," but respondents were not given specific guidelines for defining effectiveness, so each respondent might have understood terms somewhat differently. Average ratings of 3.5 to 5.0 indicated an opinion of high effectiveness or importance while ratings of one to 2.4 indicated an opinion in the opposite direction.

Respondents rated the importance of the following programming elements/processes and AE goals:

Program Elements/Processes

- Academic programming
- Therapeutic programming
- Behavior change programming
- Disciplinary programming
- Career interest programming

AE Goals

- Improved academic performance
- Improved self-esteem
- Improved change in behavior
- Improved social skills
- Development of leadership skills
- Pro-social attitude
- Development of external interests
- Career selection skills
- Development of a positive attitude
- Improved attendance

On the above processes and goals, teachers' and administrators' ratings were similar, however, disciplinary programming was statistically more important to teachers (rating of 4.28 vs. 4.08). With some exceptions, urban respondents tended to rate items slightly higher in importance than did rural respondents. Urban and rural respondents rated the development of a positive attitude and the enhancement of self-esteem identically (4.27), and rural respondents rated the development of pro-social attitudes somewhat higher than did urban respondents (rating of 4.26 vs. 4.20).

Improved change in behavior, which received a rating of more than 4.5 by all four groups, was seen as the most important goal for AE programs while behavior change programming was the most important process. Improved attendance was the second most important goal. All goals and processes except development of leadership skills received scores of greater than 3.5 by all groups indicating that they are all seen as important. Leadership was not far behind with an average rating of 3.45.

Teachers and administrators were also asked to evaluate the effectiveness of their alternative education programs according to the following expected outcomes:

Improved: Academic performance, attendance, interest in school, target behaviors, and career interest

Reduced: Suspension, tardiness, disruptive behavior, failure, dropout rate

Teachers' ratings were slightly higher for all issues except reduced tardiness. Statistically, teachers rated program effectiveness significantly higher than did administrators in improving academic performance, interest in school, and career interests, and in reducing failure. Teacher respondents rated programs as most effective in reducing suspension, academic failure, and disruptive behavior and in improved school attendance, while administrators rated programs as most effective in reducing suspension, disruptive behavior, tardiness, and dropout rates.

Though average rates were again very similar, urban respondents rated program effectiveness slightly higher than did their rural counterparts.

Despite this trend, the difference was only significant for academic performance and the dropout rate. Both rural and urban respondents rated programs as most effective in reducing suspension, disruptive behavior, and academic failure and in improving attendance.

Only for reducing suspension did all four groups rate AE effectiveness as at least four on the scale of one to five. Although all groups rated improved interest in school at less than three, for no issue was AE perceived by respondents to be ineffective.

CONCLUSIONS

Programs and Administration

Clearly the number of alternative education programs in Pennsylvania is quite large: 463 alternative education programs were funded in 2001–2002 by the Pennsylvania Department of Education under "Disruptive Youth" programming legislation. Many additional programs are funded through local school districts, grant programs and other sources. By sending the survey to school district superintendents for distribution, the researchers intended to focus on school district supported programs, whether the district provided services directly or contracted services.

Regarding the Type I- Academic, Type II- Discipline, and Type III- Therapeutic classification discussed in the literature review, Gregg (1999, p 108) notes that the distinction between types is not rigid. This statement is consistent with the findings in Pennsylvania programs. It is clear that Type II- Discipline program components are common to most programs. However, it is equally clear from the survey that components of the academic and therapeutic approaches are included in programs. Survey results of teachers and administrators help to identify some overriding characteristics of programs in Pennsylvania. The list of characteristics crosses all three program types:

- The programs are generally more than one-half day and often full-day programs.
- Services are provided throughout the 180-day school year (82 percent of respondents).
- More than 50 percent of students spend at least one-half year in the alternative program, with 23 percent spending a full school year or more.
- Teacher to student ratios are most often 1-to-6 and the large majority of programs have ratios of one teacher to 12 or fewer students.
- Curricula are geared most highly toward academic change and/or behavior change and individualization.
- A significant number of programs indicate working on balanced multiple foci that include academic, therapeutic, and behavior change.
- More than 60 percent of respondents to the teacher survey note that curricula are individually adapted in the alternative setting.
- In general, career counseling and career curricula appear to be of only modest priority.
- Discipline and behavior change are cited most often as important processes for these programs though more than two-thirds of respondents also indicated the importance of therapeutic programming.
- 67 percent of respondents name their location as separate from the regular classroom in another building or a self-contained classroom in the same building as regular education.

Alternative education programs in Pennsylvania are typically administered or managed by personnel with combined duties. The lead person is a principal with combined duties 37 percent of the time and an administrator, not a principal, with combined duties an additional 25 percent of the time. Full-time assignment of an administrator for a program is rare and may be related to the relatively small size of most programs. Nevertheless, the student population, special curriculum concerns, need for personnel professional development, and numerous administrative and organizational structural design concerns make the assignment of a full-time administrator an important issue for decision-maker consideration.

Students

The population of students in alternative programs has steadily increased. Over the past five years, 37 percent of programs experienced increases in students of up to 10 percent, and an additional 21 percent of programs experienced between 11 and 25 percent growth. Students in the surveyed programs were predominantly white (87 percent) and male (70 percent). Urban students were more racially diverse with 83 percent being white compared to 93 percent of rural AE students. But rural programs had proportionately more students with disabilities than did urban programs, perhaps excessively so. Where 18 percent of rural AE students had disabilities, the figure was 7 percent in urban programs.

According to respondents, 93 percent of alternative education efforts target students in grades 7 through 12. Only 4 percent of respondents indicate that programs are reaching into the elementary grades to provide services. Targeting a specific population of youth seems to be an important piece of resolving the issues of disruptive youth in our school systems. This supports the Cox and Davidson (1995) contention that programs targeting specific populations seem to have more impact with students. However, the following three statements may also be true: high-risk students are identifiable early in their school careers, perhaps as early as 3rd grade; parent involvement is integral to success and may be easier to obtain with younger children; and early intervention into failure experiences by providing support may prevent or more quickly replace faulty thinking patterns, negative self-concept difficulties, and behavioral problems. The risks for earlier programs are inappropriate labeling and focusing upon risk rather than resilience. A longitudinal study that tracks the intervention methods, successes, and failures of our current elementary alternative education programs may be key to our knowing whether or not continued and expanded investment in these programs is worthwhile.

Legislation appears to have a significant impact on the reasons students are placed in alternative education settings. The combination of the Act 30 guidelines, wording in Act 48, and school district responses to the survey make it clear that Pennsylvania's emphasis for alternative education is Type II-Discipline programming. Act 48 specifically states that alternative education programs are "designed to modify disruptive behavior." Act 30 guidelines for referral outline specific criteria that help to further define the types of disruptive behavior that qualify students for receiving services. The survey results confirm that programs are using these criteria to admit students into AE settings. This finding is not surprising since most alternative education providers in the commonwealth are receiving some portion of funding through the act. The finding does mask the fact that there are other legitimate reasons for providing alternative education services in our schools.

Somewhat surprising to investigators was the low percentage of students in alternative education (0.3 percent) who were returning from a detention or other juvenile delinquency placement. This low percentage exists despite the fact that state program guidelines specifically include this as one population of students that may be served. Related to this issue, the Philadelphia Inquirer (S. Snyder, May 25, 2002) reports that during a seven-month period, 837 delinquent youth were returned to Philadelphia schools from detention placements. Only 64 percent of the returning students actually attended school and 14 percent of the attending students were suspended for unacceptable behavior. Higher use of alternative education as a bridge back into the school system may serve as a valuable transition support to youth leaving those settings. The reasons for not using AE as a transition to regular school for previously detained students are unclear. The issue requires further study in which the following questions might be asked: Are options other than alternative education used? Are teaching and administrative professionals in detention and other placement settings sufficiently aware of AE school presence in communities?

One additional finding related to the referral/

placement process was that students are not typically referred to alternative education because of issues related to giftedness (adjustment, marginal performance, etc.) Only 0.05 percent of students in our sample were identified as "gifted" and in need of an alternative classroom. So, while there are AE programs designed to address the needs of gifted students, they are not well represented in this survey sample.

Returning students to the regular classroom is a stated goal for AE under state guidelines. Students generally did return to the regular classroom or home school, but more than one-half remained in AE placement for the following year. The length of participation in the alternative education setting varied but was usually more than a few months. Emergency, or in-and-out types of placement, lasting 30 days or less are not used to a great extent. This bodes well for students who may benefit from the consistency, stability, security, and individual attention afforded by alternative education.

Importantly, less than one-third of programs use a formal transition program to support students for regular education re-entry. Further study may help to determine whether or not transition programming would enhance return rates to the regular classroom. A significant component of that study would be to look at whether students returning to the regular classroom later return to AE. Additional study should also include tracking the progress of all students participating in alternative education for a specified period after leaving the program.

Personnel

Rural and urban programs appear to maintain student teacher ratios that foster individual attention and important instructional considerations, such as differentiating instruction when working with multiple ability and age levels. Rural schools appear to use special education professionals at higher rates than urban schools. This is aligned with the fact that they also serve a higher percentage of special education students. Psychologists and social workers are both represented as less than one full-time equivalent across all programs. Comments stressed the need for more counseling assistance.

Fifty-five percent of teachers hold a bachelor's degree. Approximately 40 percent hold master's degrees. Teachers are most commonly trained in secondary education (34 percent), special education (19 percent), and elementary education (19 percent). Teachers had no pre-service training or pre-service training that was inadequate 43 percent of the time.

Training, education, and professional development issues are crucial to AE. Teachers often find themselves under-prepared or totally unprepared for work in these settings. Knowledge of a wide range of curricula, specialized pedagogical techniques, classroom management, helping skills, and other skills and knowledge related to working with high-risk children and youth are required, yet there are no AE undergraduate degree programs in Pennsylvania with the lone exception of a minor at Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania. There are few graduate degree programs in this area nationwide with only one in Pennsylvania at Lock Haven University. This leaves thousands of teachers without training for the specialized duties of an AE teacher.

As many teachers have noted in this survey and in conversation, teacher preparation programs geared toward working in the regular education classroom do not prepare one for the realities of the AE classroom. Furthermore, many teachers end up in AE as a placement rather than a choice. Perhaps we must work toward the day when alternative education is the setting of choice for both the student and the faculty member.

Curriculum

The curriculum responses generated many issues for further investigation and discussion. In exploring responses to the question "In what ways is the curriculum the same or different from the regular classroom?" there were a number of positive indicators in AE including:

- Curriculum is adapted individually – age and grade differences make it necessary to implement varied curricula within the same classroom.

- There is more emphasis on social skills training and on personal issues.
- The teacher to student ratio is appropriately increased to facilitate programming.
- In general, students seem to maintain current academic levels or make gains after alternative education participation.

One concern, particularly given the placement nature of a large majority of Pennsylvania programs, was that more than one-third of AE teachers had fewer curriculum resources than did regular classroom teachers. Furthermore, nearly 55 percent indicated that students in AE are excluded from some parts of the curriculum that are available to regular education students. This fact brings into question "separate but equal" rights to education. While there may be administrative mechanisms to assist programs in avoiding the hammer of this law, it is the spirit of the law that is of concern here. AE students need the best curriculum and best teachers to become successful.

Of lesser yet important concern is the issue of family involvement. The most frequent response regarding family involvement was that it is involved on an as-needed basis. Family involvement in programming is critical to success for many students. Making family involvement an integral part of the system for delivering AE services is more likely to yield success than an "as-needed" approach.

Effectiveness

Administrators and teachers view alternative education programs as effective in reducing disruptive behavior, reducing suspension/expulsion, improving school attendance, reducing tardiness or truancy, and changing target behaviors. To a somewhat lesser extent they also indicate effectiveness in reducing academic failure, reducing dropout rates, and improving academic performance. Programs, in the opinion of respondents, are less effective in developing career interests and improving interest in school activities. These respondent perceptions are comparable to what others have stated in the literature.

Interestingly, urban respondents viewed their programs as significantly more effective in improving academic performance and reducing academic failure than their rural counterparts. This difference may be related to the fact that urban teachers indicated that AE has the "same or more curriculum resources available as the regular classroom" at a higher rate than did rural teachers. Teachers in rural settings also indicated that "more emphasis is placed on discipline in the alternative education classroom" at much higher rates than urban teachers. Perhaps the answer lies in program emphasis. Resources and program emphasis are two areas for further exploration since it is not possible to be conclusive based upon results of the current study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continued funding for alternative education projects. The legislature, Department of Education, and local school districts should continue to provide funding, at increased levels, for alternative education. The survey provides support for the idea that alternative education is an appropriate educational service for meeting the needs of many students who have not made it in the traditional, regular classroom. Qualitatively, the projects appear to be effective in areas including but not limited to reducing disruptive behavior, dropout rates, suspension, habitual truancy, tardiness, and academic failure and in improving attendance. The survey results also showed a low recidivism rate (only 8 percent of students returned to alternative education after returning to the home school from an initial alternative education placement) for students served within the 2000-2001 year. Multiple years of data collection on each student served by alternative education programs will be important to provide quantitative support for the perceptions of teachers and administrators in this survey data. The state Department of Education has begun a data collection process through their annual reporting system.

Editor's note: In the 2003-2004 state budget, the General Assembly approved $7.2 million for Alternative Education Demonstration Grants.

2. Further evaluation of the efficacy of a predominantly disciplinary approach. The funding regulations that intended to keep disruptive and marginal high-risk students in school may lead to a separate and unequal education experience for alternative education students and teachers. For example, separate facilities and/or separate administration and staffing sometimes include inadequate administrative structures, inadequate curriculum, inadequate facilities and/or equipment and supplies, and student and teacher disengagement from the home school. Often, for these high-risk students to succeed in the long run, they will require the best that can be offered in each area of service. Can these problems be avoided by additional funding and/or education models that offer innovative curriculum approaches and keep students engaged?

3. A reevaluation of the funding allocation formula to provide a higher per child funding in rural areas. In the survey sample, rural programs were spending fewer dollars per child than their counterparts in urban settings. This result is based upon the total unduplicated number of students served by responding districts divided into the alternative education program's operating budget for the year. At the same time, urban teachers report the "same or more curriculum resources available as the regular classroom" at a higher rate than rural teachers, and rural teachers report that alternative education has "fewer curriculum resources available" at a much higher rate than their urban counterparts. The survey also demonstrated that urban administrators and teachers perceived their programs to be more effective on key variables in the survey. Are these issues related to funding available to the projects? The Department of Education provides awards allocated on a per child basis, however a clear disparity between rural and urban expenditures per child exists according to our survey results. Are rural districts unable to adequately supplement the allocation with additional funds due to a limited tax base or is there another reason for the disparity?

4. Development of pilot projects that focus exclusively on providing services designed to engage families of high-risk children in the educational process. Survey analysis indicates some breakdown in programming at the level of family involvement. Nowhere is family involvement in education more important than with the at-risk child. According to survey results, families are most often included in alternative education efforts on an as-needed basis. Because current funding allocations do not appear to be adequate for extensive family programming and/or counseling efforts, the status of family involvement in alternative education programming is unlikely to change without a specific legislative mandate. Therefore, the researchers encourage legislators to look seriously at the issue of expending significant pilot project dollars for programs that focus exclusively on providing services designed to engage families of high risk children in the educational process. Professionals in education, child welfare, mental health, and juvenile justice agree that in many cases it is quite easy to identify children at a very early age who will end up in their service systems. Furthermore, all agree that meaningful family involvement is key to long-term success for these children.

5. Adequate training and professional development support for teachers working with high-risk children and youth in alternative education settings. The survey indicated that both administrators and teachers see the need for ongoing professional development activities, including appropriate graduate coursework, to be effective in working with disruptive youth in the classroom. State and school district funding must account for the different needs of these teachers and administrators in allocating funds for professional development.

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Center for Rural Pennsylvania
200 North Third St., Suite 600
Harrisburg, PA 17101
Phone (717) 787-9555
Fax (717) 772-3587
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